

THE PEACE CORPS, 45 AND GROWING, PLANS TO SERVE MORE NATIONS

**By
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WASHINGTON, APRIL 2 -- More than 45 years ago on the steps of a student hall at a university in the state of Michigan, then-U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to give two years of their lives to act as global citizens and help people in countries of the developing world.

When Kennedy was sworn in as president months later, one of his first executive actions was to sign an order creating a "Peace Corps" on March 1, 1961.

Now concluding a monthlong observance of its 45th anniversary, the Peace Corps is looking to expand into countries "where volunteers have never had the opportunity to serve before," said Gaddi Vasquez, the agency's current director. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/af/Archive/2006/Mar/02-69994.html>).)

More than 5,000 Americans took the first exams to enter the corps, which since has become a world model of volunteerism. The first volunteers arrived in Ghana five months after Kennedy created the Peace Corps.

THREE GOALS

Through the decades, Peace Corps has continued to fulfill its three goals:

- To help the people of interested countries meet their need for trained workers;
- To promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and
- To promote a better understanding of other peoples among Americans.

Since the Peace Corps' beginning, more than 180,000 have served as volunteers in a total of 138 countries. Alumni include members of Congress, diplomats, educators, business leaders, researchers, doctors, writers and contributors to society in many other fields.

Returned Peace Corps volunteers use the skills and experiences they gain overseas to become leaders, problem-solvers, and creative voices. Former volunteers possess a high level of confidence, independent judgment and crosscultural resourcefulness.

The Peace Corps experience is reflected in its popular messages to potential volunteers -- from the original "The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love," to the current "Life is Calling: How Far Will You Go?"

REFLECTING AMERICA'S DIVERISTY

The people who join the Peace Corps reflect the rich diversity of the United States in race, ethnic background, age and religion, and possess a wide range of physical abilities and professional

skills. They come from all geographical regions and all walks of life. Each brings a unique perspective.

"I can honestly say that I am not the same person I was before becoming a Peace Corps volunteer. I am a better person. I am able to see all sides of an issue or situation. My views on life and people . . . are multifaceted and global," says Nicki Hendrix, a 35-year-old Californian who was the first African-American woman ever to live in her host village in Armenia.

She said she has used her neighbors' unfamiliarity with people of African descent to teach that the United States is an ethnically diverse country.

PEACE CORPS THROUGH THE DECADES

The 1970s was a period of maturation for the Peace Corps. Despite budget constraints, volunteers were serving in 69 countries by the end of 1974. The Peace Corps was working more closely with developing nations to plan and select projects meeting countries' specific needs.

Volunteers became known to have a significant "multiplier effect" -- transferring their talents to host country nationals who, in turn, share these skills with their fellow citizens.

As the Peace Corps matured so did its volunteers. In the 1970s, the average age of a volunteer was 27; 5 percent were over 50 years old.

In 1981, Congress passed legislation making Peace Corps an independent government agency. By the Peace Corps' 20th birthday, nearly 98,000 volunteers had served in 88 countries.

In 1989, Peace Corps established World Wise Schools, a program that enabled students in U.S. classrooms to correspond with volunteers serving overseas in an effort to promote international awareness and cross-cultural understanding. By the end of the year, more than 550 schools were participating in the program. Returning volunteers still participate in the continuing World Wise Schools program as guest speakers.

The 1990s witnessed several historic events involving the Peace Corps:

In 1990 the first volunteers to serve in Eastern Europe departed the United States for Hungary and Poland; in 1992, the first group of volunteers to serve in the former Soviet Union departed to work in small-business enterprise projects in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; in 1993, the first group of volunteers to work in China departed to serve as English teachers.

The Peace Corps launched the Crisis Corps in 1995. This program allowed volunteers who had returned to the United States to provide short-term assistance during natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

In the 1990s, volunteers began to have access to new technologies that brought to them teaching and technical materials and ways to stay in contact with their families.

THE PEACE CORPS CURRENT AND PAST

Throughout its history, the Peace Corps has kept volunteer safety its top priority. When conditions in a country raise safety or security concerns, the agency suspends and sometimes closes operations in the country. In March, the Peace Corps withdrew volunteers from Bangladesh for safety reasons.

Currently there are more than 7,800 volunteers serving in 76 countries. The oldest current volunteer is 79.

On March 29, the Peace Corps announced a partnership with Cambodia March 29 that will bring American volunteers to the Southeast Asian country for the first time in the agency's history. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=March&x=20060329123341tjkcollub0.8932001&t=livefeeds/wf-latest.html>).)

Peace Corps volunteers -- current and past -- continue to fulfill John F. Kennedy's vision. They are helping to bring the world closer together.

More information is available on the Peace Corps (<http://www.peacecorps.gov/>) Web site.

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